DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 329 164 HE 024 275

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TITLE Alumni vs. Faculty Opinion on Undergraduate Psychology Programs.
PUB DATE Aug 90
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (Boston, MA, August, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Alumni; *Attitudes; College Outcomes Assessment; *Educational Quality; *Graduate Surveys; Higher Education; *Psychology; Public Colleges; *Student Development; *Teacher Attitudes; Undergraduate Study
IDENTIFIERS California State University

ABSTRACT

Opinions on undergraduate psychology programs were obtained from 348 psychology alumni who graduated between 1978 and 1988, and from 101 psychology faculty who taught during this same period on eight campuses of California State University. Twenty items reflecting student development and eight items measuring program quality were factor analyzed separately and were combined into five factors (personal growth, cultural diversity, basic skills, scientific principles, and program quality). Alumni were generally positive about their programs and their learning. Alumni were particularly aware of the major's contributions to their personal growth. Faculty mean responses about student personal growth and learning were generally between "fair" and "good," with higher ratings given to basic skills and scientific principles items. Alumni and faculty mean ratings were significantly different overall on 4 of the 5 factors and on 21 of 27 items. Every item assessing student development that revealed a significant difference was marked higher by alumni, and every item assessing program quality was marked higher by faculty. (Six references) (JDD)

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Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Boston, August, 1990

Abstract

Opinions on undergraduate psychology programs were obtained from 348 psychology alumni who graduated between 1978 and 1988 and 101 psychology faculty who taught during this same period on eight university campuses. Twenty items reflecting student development and eight items measuring program quality were factor analyzed separately and were combined into five factors. Correlational results showed a general consensus between alumni and faculty on the relative achievements of students, but discriminant analysis revealed mean differences, with alumni reporting greater growth and development and faculty rating aspects of the program, such as the quality of advising, more highly.

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Alumni vs. Faculty Opinion on Undergraduate Psychology Programs

Undergraduate psychology education is thriving. In 1987 alone, over 42,000 psychology baccalaureate degrees were awarded (National Center for Education Statistics, 1989). Psychology faculty need to examine their programs and evaluate how well the goals of this enormous enterprise are being accomplished.

The empirical focus and psychometric background shared by psychologists has prompted repeated assessments of their alumni. After reviewing the results of such surveys, McGovern and Carr (1989) recommend ongoing alumni surveys, with results directly linked to program evaluation and change. Halpern's (1988) view is similar, stressing that alumni surveys should be used to evaluate progress toward locally determined goals, a process requiring considerable faculty involvement.

Student outcomes assessment is not restricted to psychology and is not always conducted by faculty for faculty. Taxpayers, legislators, and private funding sources have increasingly begun to demand accountability for the expenses of supporting higher education (Halpern, 1988). The question has long passed from one of whether or not to undertake student outcomes assessment to one of which assessment method is most effective (Chandler, 1987).

A variety of assessment techniques are available. Traditional measures can be adopted from a "management perspective" (Kozloff, 1987, p. 420), one which gauges success by numbers of graduates

and job placements or resource counts (e.g., library size, computer availability). Other measures involve using standardized exams to evaluate student learning. These approaches, when used alone, involve narrow definitions of program excellence which have the potential to substitute quantity for quality, to discourage student diversity, and to encourage "teaching to the test" phenomena. As Halpern (1988) points out, many measures of institutional quality (e.g., campus size, library contents, prestige of funding sources) have little relationship to what students find of critical value: how much they have learned. This study examines alumni opinions concerning program quality and what they have learned, attitudinal variables that should not be ignored.

One danger of obtaining alumni opinions is that faculty may be tempted to conduct post hoc analyses, perhaps displaying some of the "I-knew-it-all-along" phenomenon (Myers, 1989, p. 20). In this study, faculty and alumni were simultaneously and independently surveyed on their opinions about program quality and contributions to student development. This approach provides the opportunity to isolate both consensus and divergence of opinion. In addition, this survey was conducted at eight different California State University (CSU) campuses, each with an independent curriculum and faculty, so comparisons of alumni and faculty opinions can be examined in the aggregate and at separate universities, allowing for assessment of the generalizability of results.

Method

Opinions on the undergraduate psychology program were obtained from 348 psychology alumni who graduated between 1978 and 1988 and 101 psychology faculty who taught during that period at eight CSU campuses. The CSU system consists of 20 campuses and currently enrolls over 365,000 students, and the eight selected campuses represent all major geographical areas in the state. Contacts on each of these campuses, who were guaranteed campus and respondent confidentiality, generated a list of names and addresses of all known alumni and all present and former faculty. From 35 to 55 alumni and from 4 to 20 faculty from each campus responded to the survey.

For the alumni, random or universal samples were drawn from each campus, depending on population sizes, and alumni were contacted at least twice, first with a cover letter and questionnaire, then with a follow-up reminder postcard. If fewer than 50 questionnaires from each campus were returned, either a third mailing was made to non-respondents, or, if the list contained more possible respondents, a replacement sample was drawn and contacted. Universal samples were selected for faculty, who were contacted with a cover letter and questionnaire. Faculty who did not respond to this first mailing were sent a follow-up postcard, and, finally, an additional letter stressing the importance of their response. The estimated return rate is 28% for alumni and 34% for faculty. (These estimates are conservative since the number of letters that were not received because of address and name changes could not be calculated).

Both faculty and alumni questionnaires were tested on a pilot campus. Each contained four pages of questions that collected demographic information, ratings of contributions of the major to student development, and ratings of aspects of program quality.

For the alumni, the contributions of the major to student development were assessed by a list of 20 items preceded by the following question: "How well did your undergraduate major add to your development in the following areas?" (For faculty this wording was changed to "How well did the major contribute to student development in the following areas?") Each item had four-point Likert scale response categories, ranging from "Poor" (1) to "Excellent" (4). A "Not Applicable" rating was also available. An additional set of six items assessed the quality of the program using the same scale and the following instructions: "Again, thinking about your undergraduate major, please rate the following for the campus from which you graduated." (Correspondingly, faculty were asked to "Please rate the following aspects of this program.")

The following question was asked of alumni: "When you reflect upon your time at this campus, how often did the faculty in your major challenge you to do the very best you could do?" For faculty, the question was phrased "When you reflect on your teaching experience at this campus, did you challenge students to do the very best they could do?" For both the alumni and faculty, possible responses ranged from "Never" (0) to "Always" (4).

Alumni were asked "Which of the following best represents how you feel about your A.B. degree?", while faculty were asked "Which

of the following best represents your view of the undergraduate degree program in which you taught at your campus?" Four possible responses were provided, ranging from "It is a degree of poor quality." (1) to "It is a degree of excellent quality" (4).

The alumni were 71% female and 86% white, with a mean age of 33.07 (SD=8.64) and estimated mean age at graduation of 27.97 (SD=8.23). The faculty were 38% female and 100% white, with a mean age of 50.39 (SD=10.20).

Results

Twenty student development items were factor analyzed and yielded four factors: Personal Growth, Cultural Diversity, Basic Skills, and Scientific Principles. (One of these items loaded on multiple factors and was excluded from subsequent analyses). The six program quality items, the "challenged" item, and the "quality of the degree" item were factor analyzed and yielded one factor: Program Quality. Five factor scores were created by averaging scores for the relevant variables, and, to reduce the effects of missing data, factor scores were created if no more than one relevant item was omitted. Table 1 lists the items contributing to each factor.

A discriminant analysis comparing alumni to faculty on the five factors was significant, χ^2 (5, n=381) = 170.91, $p < .0001$, with a canonical correlation of .60. Eighty-two per cent of the alumni and 85% of the faculty were correctly classified using the discriminant

function. Univariate follow-up t-tests were performed on the factors and individual items. Results are summarized in Table 1. A parallel set of discriminant analyses comparing alumni to faculty at each of the seven campuses having at least eight faculty respondents were all significant at $p<.001$, with canonical correlations ranging from .56 to .78, with a median of .59. Correct classifications ranged from 73 to 91% (with a median of 84%) for alumni and from 70% to 100% (with a median of 89%) for faculty.

There was a significant Spearman correlation between alumni and faculty mean ratings of the 19 student development items, r_s = .70, p = .001. The Spearman correlation between the alumni and faculty mean ratings of the 8 program quality items was also significant, r_s = .69, p < .05. Parallel correlational analyses were performed for each of the seven campuses with at least eight faculty respondents. The correlations between alumni and faculty mean ratings of student development items were all significant at $p<.05$ and ranged from .36 to .78, with a median of .62. Three of the correlations between alumni and faculty mean ratings of program quality items were significant at $p<.05$ and ranged from .77 to .90. The non-significant correlations ranged from -.13 to .34.

Discussion

Data were analyzed in two different ways, examining mean differences and correlations between means. While mean differences between alumni and faculty were apparent, correlational results indicate considerable agreement between the two groups on what the psychology major is accomplishing.

Alumni were generally positive about their programs and their learning. High averages suggest that alumni are particularly aware of the major's contributions to their personal growth, especially adaptability, interest in lifelong learning, and self-understanding. Alumni ratings of the cultural diversity items tended to be lower than their ratings of personal growth items, but averages generally were still closer to 3.0 ("Good") than 2.0 ("Fair"). Their ratings of basic skills and scientific principles items were about 3.0 ("Good"), with highest ratings associated with learning the content of the major. Alumni mean responses on the program quality items are generally near "Good," ranging from "Fair" on preparation for employment to "Good" for accessibility of faculty.

Faculty mean responses about student personal growth and learning were generally between "Fair" and "Good", with higher ratings given to basic skills and scientific principles items. Program contributions to planning projects, understanding written material, learning scientific methodology, statistics, and knowledge within the major earned higher ratings from faculty. All but one item within the Program Quality factor were rated between "Good" and "Excellent" by faculty. The highest ratings were for quality and availability of courses and preparation for graduate school. The only item rated below "Good" was preparation for employment.

Alumni and faculty mean ratings were significantly different overall, on four of the five factors, and on 21 of the 27 items. The pattern was simple and consistent. Every item assessing student development that revealed a significant difference was marked

higher by alumni, and every item assessing program quality was marked higher by faculty. From the faculty's perspective, alumni overestimated how much they learned; from the alumni's perspective, faculty overestimated the quality of the program.

Mean differences were especially consistent for two of the four student development factors: Personal Growth and Cultural Diversity. Alumni and faculty had significant mean differences on every item for these two factors. Alumni ratings on the Personal Growth factor averaged a full half-point higher than faculty ratings, almost a whole standard deviation. They particularly disagreed on the major's contribution to lifelong learning, leadership skills, and identifying values.

Each of the eight campuses in this study operates independently and has its unique student population, faculty, and program, allowing for an examination of the generalizability of results. Alumni and faculty rank orderings of program quality items at different campuses do not consistently agree. However, the majority of eight campuses showed identical patterns of alumni/faculty mean differences and agreement between alumni and faculty on the relative attainment of aspects of student learning, suggesting that these findings are generalizable to other universities.

When interpreting alumni surveys, faculty should not be overly disappointed by weaker than expected alumni ratings of general aspects of program quality; neither should they feel uniquely effective if alumni give more positive evaluations of their own learning than expected. There is considerable agreement between

faculty and alumni on the relative accomplishments in student development. The next question is one of "What should we be accomplishing?", rather than "What is being accomplished?"

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Table 1 Ratings of Aspects of the Undergraduate Major by Alumni and Faculty

	Alumni		Faculty		
Variable M	SD	M	SD		
Personal Growth (7)	3.08	.58	2.58	.55	****
Being Independent (7)	3.08	.68	2.66	.82	****
Being Adaptable (6)	3.24	.74	2.80	.72	****
Understanding Self (7)	3.18	.74	2.95	.78	**
Identifying Values (7)	3.03	.81	2.37	.82	****
Lifelong Learning (7)	3.36	.79	2.57	.76	****
Group Cooperation (7)	2.99	.87	2.54	.77	****
Leading Others (7)	2.76	.92	2.14	.75	****
Cultural Diversity (7)	2.56	.72	2.23	.69	****
Gender Roles (6)	2.97	.86	2.78	.77	*
U. S. Minorities (6)	2.47	.92	2.20	.85	**
World Cultures (7)	2.23	.86	1.72	.79	****
Basic Skills (5)	2.95	.63	2.79	.58	*
Planning Projects (4)	3.07	.80	3.09	.76	
Writing Well (5)	2.99	.84	2.72	.80	***
Speaking Well (6)	2.62	.86	2.29	.68	****
Understanding Writing (5)	3.13	.73	3.04	.68	
Scientific Principles (4)	3.03	.59	3.01	.52	
Logical Inferences (6)	3.14	.77	2.93	.72	*
Scientific Methods (4)	3.14	.79	3.25	.70	
Statistics/Math (4)	2.92	.88	3.04	.82	
Technology Impact (6)	2.66	.85	2.41	.83	*
Content of Major (5)	3.29	.68	3.37	.56	
Program Quality (7)	2.73	.56	3.16	.41	****
Accessibility of Faculty (5)	3.09	.82	3.22	.82	
Helpfulness of Advisor (7)	2.39	1.08	3.21	.77	****
Quality of Courses (7)	2.99	.64	3.26	.62	****
Availability of Courses (7)	2.96	.74	3.26	.74	****
Preparation for Employment (7)	2.16	.88	2.53	.76	****
Preparation for Grad School (7)	2.97	.82	3.40	.76	****
Challenge by Faculty (7)	2.41	.86	3.18	.68	****
Quality of Degree (7)	2.90	.67	3.24	.70	****

Note. Numbers in parenthesis indicate the number of campuses that show the same pattern of mean differences between alumni and faculty.
*p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.005. ****p<.001.